



# Suicide Blonde

*Darcey Steinke*

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## **Suicide Blonde** Darcey Steinke

*Vanity Fair* called this intensely erotic story of a young woman's sexual and psychological odyssey "a provocative tour through the dark side." Jesse, a beautiful twenty-nine-year-old, is adrift in San Francisco's demimonde of sexually ambiguous, bourbon-drinking, drug-taking outsiders. While desperately trying to sustain a connection with her bisexual boyfriend in a world of confused and forbidden desire, she becomes the caretaker of and confidante to Madame Pig, a besotted, grotesque recluse. Jesse also falls into a dangerous relationship with Madison, Pig's daughter or lover or both, who uses others' desires for her own purposes, hurtling herself and Jesse beyond all boundaries. With *Suicide Blonde*, Darcey Steinke delves into themes of identity and time, as well as the common — and now tainted — language of sexuality.

## **Suicide Blonde Details**

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Author : Darcey Steinke

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# From Reader Review Suicide Blonde for online ebook

## Printable Tire says

It's been a while since I had the dubious honor of reading precious MFa "literature." The sort of literature where Everything means Something, where everything's articulate, where all is symbol, where nothing has air to breath. Where perfectly orchestrated set-pieces march tiredly across the page in such a formation to make them easier for you to underline for your life-suffocating English class.

But what did I expect from a book that gets its title from an INXS song?

Now a new man, I would have normally stopped reading this after Chapter 1, but I've had this book for such a long time (published in 1992, it was probably no more than 5 years old when I bought it at a yard sale. Ah, how time flies!) I suffered through its pretentious prose, its overly-analyzing, cloyingly cynical processing of artificial situations, all to my own undoing.

When characters talk (when they do talk, after pages of glossy glossing-over dull thoughts) it is like no person has ever talked in the whole history of talking:

"You're not one of those people who consider seeing your parents argue intense?"

"I think seeing a seagull with a broken wing on the side of the road can be just as horrible as-"

"As what?" Madison asked. "Getting raped?"

There are no truths, no wisdom, nothing to be found in this book, just a smear of common MFA cliches tiredly and randomly presented in mediocre "literary" writing for which we are supposed to pat the author on the back:

"The fat woman ran her vacuum and I was reminded intensely of the abortion I had had in college. The suck of the vacuum, the rich smell of blood, and how afterward I stayed in my room with the blinds closed and the lights off for several days. I had the sensation of being completely empty, like standing in your old room the minute after the last box has been carried out. I remember going outside in my nightgown to a bench in the sunlight. Nothing that came before that moment seemed real. As if I woke, not just from three days, but from a whole lifetime of sleep."

Um, okay.

Even though he is dead on the page, the narrator's boyfriend is still an insufferable, mooney douchebag, as played by Ethan Hakwe if there ever was a movie. In fact, all the characters are dead on the page, dull, lifeless husks in which the narrator/author projects whatever mindless pretty prose fancies her at the moment:

"And Bell was gay, or at least ambivalent enough to make the idea of marriage ridiculous. But even if I were a man, as I often used to wish, I couldn't stop him from going down. It was what he wanted. I could tell the way he held his cigarette, how when he spoke he looked coldly through my head and into the next world."

There is so much tell with the characters, so much projection of philosophies and insights which are never felt because they are never shown. They are not real people, they are personifications.

Nothing in this book seems like it is real. It feels like the writings of a first-time author self-consciously writing a book of perfectly neat, smotheringly beautiful words.

Oh, how it reminds me of my own words! How it reminds me of my own first-time authorship. The comparison is hurtful and startling and embarrassing. But if this can get published, then so I suppose can I.

How easy it was to gloss boredly, angrily, frustratingly over every over-packaged, suffocating paragraph. You can tell the talent is there, it just needs room to grow. A story worth telling. Some truth, some life rather than pretty, MFA-approved lettering.

Perhaps I am tired of MFA "Literature" because I have been reading so much pulpy genre novels lately? Perhaps self-indulgent whiny literature bores me now because I have become so accustomed to gritty, exciting sleaze?

No, rubbish: this book is rubbish.

Ugh, to think this is the book I read as I turned 30! Although the character, being 29, and wallowing in over-intellectualized self-pity makes it a good addition to my Gen X/Slack lit collection, of which my interest in is quickly dying.

(As an aside, no less than three men told me the book's maxim-pin-up-like cover made them interested in the book. Sex sells!)

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### **Theresa Griffin Kennedy says**

This book is my all time favorite modern novel. I read it every year, I think I've read it six times now, but to me, this book was a welcome and needed journey down a dark rabbit hole I needed to explore. It gave me a sense of hope for my own life. I was married to a bisexual man who I adored, a former stripper and "hustler" who simply could not be faithful to me. I could relate to so much of the story line, and the characters, Jessie, Bell, Madison and Madam Pig. It is a dark, lonely, sad walk down deserted streets with fallen and doomed people who won't and can't be saved. How many of those same characters have you seen in your own life? Too many. In so many ways I felt the proverbial connection to Jessie. Her intense solitary loneliness, her desire for goodness and to protect and love this man, intent on destroying himself. To want to save him, to be unable to. The language is lush, beautiful. The characters broken and yet the thinnest veil of hope seems to survive somehow. The book was immensely popular when it first came out in the early 90's and it continues to be. Perhaps that's why on June 7th, 2017 Maggie Nelson of The Paris Review wrote an article on the 25th "anniversary" of its publication and why it is still such a beautiful story. Its THAT good, that seminal and important to American culture. I realize I'm a nut about this book but I've got valid reasons to be. It reads like poetry, like a song, drifting along the periphery of your awareness and Jessie and Bell haunt you, just like those other people in your life haunt you. Excellent novel, wonderful read.

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### **Roman Clodia says**

Smoky rooms, dangerous streets, sleazy sex, lit by neon, to a soundtrack of the 'Liebestod' from *Tristan and Isolde*, edgy, intense, brutal, where love is tainted but a heart might still be pure, drugs and dreams, purple

prose, urban and urbane, Baudelaire meets Kerouac via Anais Nin and Sylvia Plath, love and lust, dirt and desire, experience and annihilation, hypnotic, seductive, lyrical, moody and melancholy, a hymn to loneliness and failed connections, modernity and loss - gorgeous, gorgeous!

Many thanks to Canongate for an ARC via NetGalley

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### **Karen Vaughn says**

This book seemed really self-indulgent to me. Angst can be okay if it is made to serve a larger purpose or illuminate the reader in some fashion (*Catcher in the Rye*, for example). I don't think *Suicide Blonde* accomplished that.

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### **Ashlynn says**

"Was it the bourbon or the dye fumes that made the pink walls quiver like vaginal lips?"

Two of my great friends live in San Fran and I know the lifestyle too well.

The pains over a bi-sexual boyfriend are menstrual, cutting, real. Fuck you, Bell. This stuff is great.

Madam Pig is real character.

Don't believe me? Read it.

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### **Nadia says**

I read this when I was in my late teens and I remember highlighting it all over the place. I was depressed and miserable and this book was my only friend. My rating is based on what this book meant to me then, not so sure how I'd feel about it now.

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### **Ova - Excuse My Reading says**

A very weird one to rate.

Full of sexual scenes and descriptions, somehow damaged people, incredibly creative and vivid descriptions of everything. I can't say it's not a good book but it was probably too depressing for me.

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## Alex Sarll says

I'd assumed this must be the book INXS' second-best song was named after, though if anything it was the other way around – and that temporal confusion was prophetic, because more than anything this novel kept reminding me how long ago the nineties was, with a mixture of casual debauchery and old-fashioned attitudes such that I more than once had to tell myself that no, this wasn't the seventies, but yes, it really was like that. There was a sort of low-rent lushness which even the skint could manage, a willingness to transgress without wanting to badge it as anything but transgressive, which is captured well here. Edgier than McInerney, but less so than Ellis, this feels like a book Rebel Inc. might have published. Hell, maybe it was; they're one of those things from that era which you'd think would have more Internet footprint than it has. The tone is "liquid and various" – the introduction bills it as "feminist camp", which sometimes feels right, but for all of the headiness, the sense of being narcotised sometimes tips over into affectlessness, or disaffectedness, or maybe both – the same strange distance from the extremities witnessed and undergone that you find in the weariest Interpol songs. I found the cover's billing of Suicide Blonde as a feminist classic curious; it's not the most obvious angle, though I suppose it fits the story of, by the protagonist's own description, a pretty girl who wants more without knowing what more is, but desperately hopes it's not just marrying money. And simply because this sort of long dark night of the soul, assuaged and/or exacerbated by sexual (mis)adventure, is something experienced much more often by male leads, written much more often by male authors. There are some fabulous lines, which at their best made me think of Kate Bush gone to the dark(er) side: "I followed, her scent rich like menstrual blood. I was curious, I still hadn't felt that exquisite kick of perversity." But for all that, its jaded tone is communicated so effectively that I'm left glad I don't often give books a star rating, because by the end I was sufficiently numbed that I'm honestly not sure whether or not I liked this.

(Netgalley ARC)

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## Rebekah says

What i learned: sometimes, even a not-that-great book can break your heart. It wasn't very satisfying, but i kept reading thinking that there would be something profound in there, but mostly, it was just very sad and empty.

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## Evan says

There were moments of bravura writing here; lots of well expressed thoughts about life, love, mortality. The sum of the parts definitely is greater than the whole. For some reason the book's meandering arc undercut the sustenance of the mood, at least for me. I did learn a little about the psychology of women who hang on with dreamy loser men. The sensationalistic, seedy aspects of the book that have been so touted did not strike me as being really that shocking or original. Like better books before it (eg., *The Day of the Locust*) it is yet another attempt to capture the seediness of sunny California and its broken dreamers and human detritus. In the end, I wished the book had been more about Madison. I wanted to know more about her, but the necessary limitations of Jesse's perspective in regard to her prevents this. Oddly, even though it is written smoothly, I found myself wearied by this story and could only take it in 10-page chunks. It took me days to read when it should only have taken a few hours.

I would give this a moderate thumbs up.

I think I'd like to give Steinke another go, particularly her "Jesus Saves," which seems to be even more acclaimed. (Interjection: As I am slightly revising this review, I have since read *Jesus Saves* and it was wonderful.)

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EARLIER THOUGHTS as I was reading:

SEE FINAL THOUGHTS AT BOTTOM:

INITIAL:

Dark side, sexuality, quick read. Think this might suit me right now. But, really, the girl on the cover renders me a complete simpleton. I fell for it, like a horse after a carrot. I freely admit.

She writes well. Good scene setting. Main character seems like a fish out of water, straddling the hetero and gay milieu in San Fran. Sometimes she overreaches metaphorically, the author. Bothered me a bit that the editors failed to catch the word rhythms spelled with an extra y. The Grove Press is no fly-by-night... Whatever.

QUARTER:

Far enough in now to remark. A solid read. Some cool observations about love. Learning more about the female mind. Hits a roadblock for me, though, with the character of Madame Pig. I feel like I've walked into someone else's novel. The eccentric pathetic fat woman fag hag. Is she Miss Havesham or the woman from Gilbert Grape or something from Flannery O'Connor or JK Toole or Armistead Maupin or that John Behrendt book? The fact that I'm thinking all that does not bode well. Hopefully we can get back to more self brooding and sex.

HALFWAY:

It still hasn't quite shifted into high gear year, but the Jesse/Madison dynamic is heating up a little, with not-so-subtle hints of Persona-like doubling between them: each dying their hair the opposite color of their natural shade; the similarity in looks and body type; the accidental mutual connections, etc. So far this book strikes me as uneven; there are passages of confidence and great thoughtfulness from the author alternating with some less sure, sophomoric prose.

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## Nicola says

*Suicide Blonde* is an anti-love story, as its two protagonists (brittle "good girl", Jesse, who's never really been all that good, and weary, would-be actor, Bell, who can't stop performing) undergo the maudlin process of breaking up. The result is a woozy tale of dissolute characters having sex and trying to ease their misery in the fractured, contradictory city of San Francisco.

With its lyrical writing, casual bisexuality and gritty situations, this book feels like it was written for me. Or my 17-year-old self, anyway. A few years older/wiser, I must admit that, while *Suicide Blonde's* pretty package of misery is still appealing to me, I also recognize it as a wholly self-indulgent novel.

There's an inexplicable quality to the action. For instance, it's hard to believe that Jesse, who seems rootless as a ghost, would throw her lot in with beautiful, vicious Madison so readily. In fact, if anything, the novel

reads like a bleak fantasy or dream sequence. It's hard to stay engaged with a narrative that is so meandering, and there were times, while reading, when I just got really tired of it.

With its unrelenting misery and whiff of pretension, some readers will undoubtedly find *Suicide Blonde* irritating. But, despite its flaws, I actually liked it a lot.

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## **Mal says**

Steinke's writing reminds me of a more accessible Kathy Acker. It's like an Eyes Wide Shut-type surreal fantasy — overtly sexual, dark, obscure, largely pointless. If you don't like to read books that make you feel uncomfortable, you won't enjoy it. But I liked *Suicide Blonde*, and appreciated Steinke's commentary on human nature. Steinke writes beautiful, and occasionally I would find sentences or passages that I absolutely loved and wanted to read over and over.

Interesting enough, I didn't particularly like the heroine, Jesse, but I rooted for her. Maybe it was just that she reminded me a bit of myself; through the novel, she tries to get to that pinnacle of "modern feminist woman" but gets lost by her own personal failures and apathy. The characters in *Suicide Blonde* are obnoxious, sadistic, bizarre, and hedonistic. In other words, they are like most people.

My one major dislike was that the book largely seems to be trying to to somewhere, but never quite gets there. The book doesn't end abruptly, but I did get the feeling that the book wasn't over when it had ended. The book's very Nihilistic, there really is not much of a point to it. Overall, it's a fast read (it took me a day), and if you're paying attention, you can get a lot out of it.

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## **Christian Bauman says**

I read this book when I was in the army, just as I was starting to seriously begin writing, and not very long after my own first ill-fated trip to San Francisco. The book was like a hard shock in my veins; Steinke was the first person in my general age group (give or take, I was born in 1970, not sure of her) who was writing the kind of fiction I wanted to write, or thought I wanted to write. She was restricted by little, passionate in all things, and writing about people that no one else was much interested in.

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## **Miranda says**

*Suicide Blond*'s first sentence "Was it the bourbon or the dye fumes that made the pink walls quiver like vaginal lips?" threw me off immediately. I like a little foreplay at least in the first paragraph, and the introductory sentence left me feeling like the victim of a literary drive by. This is not to say that I am prudish, especially in my reading, but this sentence was crafted just to shock the reader. It left a bad taste in my brain, but not as much as the main character. Jesse is self involved and shallow, as far as characters go. She blames those in her life for making her feel inadequate, but I believe she is projecting. Normally, this would not bother me, but we are supposed to identify with her and pity her, something I cannot bring myself to do. She moves from Bell to Pig to Madison, seeking someone who will ultimately take care of her and give her meaning. Jesse thinks she can punish Bell for not loving her enough by running off to live like a bad girl only to return and tell him all of the horrible things she is doing, further showing that it was not out of self discovery but to snub someone who already doesn't care what she does. I found the rest of her characters fascinating and lifelike, albeit somewhat stereotypical. It is the protagonist that falls short and contributes to



the novel's wanting.

It would be easier to enjoy this novel were it not for the dreamy way you meander through the pages. Reading it feels ephemeral; I found myself striving towards a plot that tried to evade me at every turn. The structure is labyrinthine, and I do not mean that to be complimentary. Occasionally there is a beautiful gem of a sentence that you go back over and digest before moving on to the next random plot contrivance. It is obvious that underneath the indifference that Steinke possesses talent, she is just doing too good of a job hiding it under a boring plot.

Steinke wishes to take the reader to a place that she believes is dark and cutting edge. She wants you to see how troubled Jesse is and pity her in her own self involvement. I came away believing Jesse to be responsible for her own problems and experiencing a sense of lost time; I know I read it and I know time has passed, but there isn't much to show or remember what happened between the covers. It was not that I found myself lost in the literary world but that I found myself in limbo just outside of it. I finished with indifference. Even Suicide Blond's ending is anticlimactic and failed to draw me in enough to feel any kind of closure. Then again, it also failed to invest me in the story so I figure I didn't lose out. It reads like a first novel for someone who shows great promise but just doesn't know how to show it yet; the only problem with Suicide Blond is that Steinke has published before, which I find regretful.

By far it is not the best novel I have ever read, but Suicide Blond is also not the worst (you should hear what I have to say about House of Sand and Fog). I doubt I'll ever pick it up again to read in its entirety, but there are a few sentences there that I, even now, want to read over again. This gives me a glimmer of hope that Steinke may put something else out that is really worth reading one day and gets across the beauty of prose that ghosts throughout the novel. I wanted to like this book. I really did. I tried, and I failed.

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## **HFK says**

### **WAS IT THE BOURBON OR THE DYE FUMES THAT MADE THE PINK walls quiver like vaginal lips?**

Perhaps one of the best ways to start a book that is supposedly about a woman who is entering into an sexual odyssey to find herself. The greatness of that first, very vaginal and pink, sentence should never continue with a monotonous, numb, depressive and boring chapters that do not improve along with the story, but unfortunately it does exactly that.

It is not unusual to build a story like this from a negative point of view. It is easy to create a female character in an unsatisfied relationship where sex and sexual desires play the part of insecurities, conflicts and ruin. It is a formula that works, but perhaps I am that person who would enjoy sexual odysseys to be portrayed in more exciting and adventurous ways, where the bounds would be teased in physical levels without actually hurting one's psyche while at it.

I would have enjoyed better if our female MC, Jesse, would have treasured her boyfriend's bi-sexual side instead of seeing it as an constant threat and a reason to change herself. I would have enjoyed more if voyeurism would have been shown in the light of special kind of shared intimacy rather than as a way to gain negative power over someone else. I would have enjoyed more if a fisting of a man would have been shown

as an ultimate submissive act from a man to an dominant woman instead of it being trashed as to be an action where all respect and trust is destroyed by violent and power-hungry acts. I would have maybe enjoyed more if sex with strangers would have been dealt through exchanges that do not involve money, or something that could almost be described as emotional rape of a person.

I understand that the need for a "growth" usually comes from when a person is somehow negatively wrapped in their lives, but it would be nice to read more erotically stimulating stories with serious aspects without always having this idea on the background that vivid, experimental sexuality would somehow automatically mean destruction, shame or low worth of self or the others.

It just reads extremely dull, and perhaps highlights the unnatural approach so many have when comes to sex, something that is utterly natural and healthy part of life for many.

To me it seems that the characters are build just for this specific moment, this specific need *Suicide Blonde* presents. They are flat, unlikable, troubled and hold their intellectual side on the pseudo instead of really reflecting sexuality and the past traumas that affect the lives of the sufferers.

San Francisco is brought to life as a place of dirty streets, prostitution, striptease joints, clubs, drag queens, gays, transsexuals and the likes. I am not sure how San Francisco was during the 90's, which is when *Suicide Blonde* was written, but it doesn't read intriguing, wonderfully diverse place for one to sexually enjoy and explore, but something that is almost described as abnormal and rotten.

There is some religious references, I especially enjoyed the part where Jesse made out with a Jesus statue in a church, there is metaphorical writing, but more than less, there is too clean and manipulative writing that is more self-serving than brainy food for the anticipating audience.

I am glad I read *Suicide Blonde*, I am just sorry it was such an simplistic experience.

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